

Prelude:**[Ester Funk]****Gathering Thoughts and Call to Worship:****[Doug Schulz]**

Welcome to Grace Mennonite Church on this third Sunday of Advent! Our theme these weeks leading toward Christmas is “Prepare! Restoration is Coming.” Oh, don’t we wish that somehow the COVID-19 curse would end soon and what we call “normal life” would return! The world feels dark not only because of winter coming but because we are wondering when the pandemic will ease and leave us alone. We lie awake at night, perhaps, thinking: “How am I supposed to find joy this Christmas?!” Without doubt it’s the strangest thing to see the light-sparkling symbols of this season in the decorations we’ve laid out yet feel so awkward and concerned.

Well, today Beth Woelk will offer a reflection on the way the miracle of Light finds its way into the unlikeliest places and brings JOY-filled healing and restoration. Beth will focus on how we can rise above external circumstances to live gratefully and joyfully in transforming ways as we open ourselves to God’s love at work within and through us.

We do once again thank our decorators, musicians, and recording technician, for helping us find a bit of joy in our Advent service today. Take a deep breath, say a sincere prayer, open your heart and mind as we now light three Advent Candles. [Candle #1 lit] The first candle radiates the hope we have in Jesus. [Candle #2 lit] The second candle calls us to be the peace of Christ in an unsettled world. [Candle #3 lit] The third candle extends the promise of joy as we experience God’s healing for our restless souls.

Join your hearts now as you listen to this brief Call to Worship and then to a song of praise and surrender to God, representing the joyful, humble and heartfelt prayer of Mary when she learned of the role she would play in bringing peace, hope and love to the world through a promised Child.

Though darkness is present and earthly trials weigh heavy,
the promise of Advent is true healing and joy for weary people.
Come; let us prepare our hearts. Restoration is coming!

Solo (as Prayer):**“The angel Gabriel”****[Selah Woelk]**

*The angel Gabriel from heaven came, his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame.
“All hail,” said he, “thou lowly maiden Mary, most highly favored lady,” gloria!*

*“For known as blessed mother thou shalt be, all generations laud and honor thee.
Thy son shall be Immanuel by seers foretold, most highly favored lady,” gloria!*

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head, "To me be as it pleaseth God," she said. "My soul shall laud and magnify his holy name." Most highly favored lady, gloria!

Passing of the Peace and Prayers of the People

[Doug Schulz]

I invite you to stand if you are comfortable doing so and turn about a bit to greet one another with bows and waves and winks and squints and happily wrinkled brows, or however you wish, as we pass peace and joy today. "The peace of Christ be with you!" [Be seated]

We pause recording now to invite sharing of celebrations or concerns to be included in our time of "Prayers of the People". [Sharing, if any]

Our focus this morning is on the joy we find in aligning our lives in response to the creative indwelling presence of God in our own persons and in our church family and, as a matter of fact, in our community and country, and everywhere in the world, even throughout the unfathomable depths of the entire universe. Let us believe in joy that penetrates fear and pain and dread and despair to change our hearts and minds by filling them with purpose and power and peace. So, let's join our hearts into one as I pray... and after, we'll close our time of prayer in song.

O God, you are the Light of our lives, the Love in which we believe so that we can know that the path of peace is where we'll find you, and we can discover that the hope of holiness and wholeness is to be known in real ways through our trust in your grace.

O Light of our existence, of our rich human experience, we thank you for the gift of remarkable, radiant joy that lifts us into awareness of your presence in, and among, us. Thank you for joy that inspires and guides as we enter your purposes by sharing love, peace and hope through our lives in the world.

We think of our world now, praying that your candle-power of joy will be some kind of pure energy today for all who grieve or suffer... that your joy will be a spark of clarity and confidence for those who seek wisdom to lead in the distribution of vaccines and for those who care daily for the ill and for lives that are failing...

O God of Loving Light, burn bright today, burn fear and doubt away. Let joy be born again and again in us, enough joy to share, enough to shine out to others anywhere as we fashion genuine joy into good action toward others, far and near.

Loving Heart of all hearts, hear our prayers, and by your Spirit,
prepare us to unite our lives with joy to care about a world restored.
AMEN

Prayer in Song: “Come Now, O God of Peace” [VU # 34]

*Come now, O God of hope, we are your people;
pour out your spirit that we be one body.*

*Come now, O God of peace, we are your people;
pour out your spirit that we be one body.*

*Come now, O God of joy, we are your people;
pour out your spirit that we be one body.*

Scripture: Psalm 126 [Doug Schulz]

1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,[a]
we were like those who dream.

2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them.”

3 The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.

4 Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

5 May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

6 Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

Hymn: “Praise the One who breaks the darkness” [STS # 1]

*Praise the One who breaks the darkness with a liberating light;
praise the One who frees the pris’ners, turning blindness into sight.
Praise the One who preached the gospel, healing ev’ry dread disease,
calming storms and feeding thousands with the very bread of peace.*

*Praise the One who blessed the children with a strong yet gentle word;
praise the One who drove out demons with a piercing, two-edged sword.*

inadvertent or perhaps intentional impetus within me to learn more about joy. I remember always feeling that if “Joy” is my name I want to embody it. When I was 6 years old my family moved from Ontario to Saskatchewan. My parents, a young pastoral couple, served a church in the tiny farming community of Main Centre. Contrary to its name, it was not the main centre of anything, it was the middle of nowhere and we moved there leaving all of our extended family in Ontario. I was quickly transformed into a prairie girl by the wheat fields and endless horizons that surrounded our little parsonage next door to the steepled church which was the centre of our lives and the meeting place of a vibrant faith community. There was a couple in our church named Henry and Elizabeth Derksen who embodied deep trust in the wellspring of God’s Love. I remember them now as spiritual ancestors in my life who shaped my faith and illuminated my path. Henry and Elizabeth had 7 children and multiple grandchildren and yet they “adopted” us as their own, inviting my brothers and I to call them Grandma and Grandpa. Grandma radiated joy. She was the kind of person whose eyes glowed and sparkled. She was gentle and affectionate and often smiling or laughing. Her radiance flowed out the Light that nourished and sustained her soul through prayer, reading and music. As a child, I noticed that when my parents were with Grandma and Grandpa there was lots of laughter and they would talk about how God was moving and working in their midst. But there was also room for sadness, struggle and lament. Grandma and Grandpa’s commitment to joy did not involve ignoring the pain that was present in their lives or in the world. But they chose to resist being overwhelmed by the brokenness and to work towards restoration and wholeness.

In the beginning of Psalm 126 that Doug read for us earlier, we hear the psalmist remembering what God has done for God’s people: “*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,*” he exults, “*we were like those who dream.... The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.*” But then time shifts for the psalmist, his remembrance of restoration past becomes a prayer for the rejoicing yet to come: “*Restore our fortunes, O God,*” he pleads. “*May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.*”

Perhaps more than any other liturgical season, Advent possesses this sort of now-but-not-yet quality that the writer evokes in this psalm. During Advent we remember and celebrate the Christ who came to us even as we also cry out for the ways that we are still longing for his coming. This can be a difficult paradox or tension to hold.

Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians gives some suggestions for ways to hold this tension. Spiritual practices to sustain us while we wait, watch and work for the fullness of restoration. I’ll paraphrase Paul’s instructions with the help of The Message translation: *Rejoice no matter what. Pray all the time. Practice gratitude - thank God no matter what happens. Don’t suppress the spirit and don’t stifle those*

who may have a word from the Spirit. Look for inspiration and be discerning about what inspires you. And then Paul gives us this beautiful promise - an invitation to trust - May the God who makes everything holy and whole, put you together - spirit, soul and body and keep you fit for the coming of Christ. The one who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he'll do it! If God promises restoration, God'll deliver it! Do you hear the invitation? A calling to the kind of joy that flows out of the daily practices of gratitude, trust, discernment and faith.

I used to think that joyful people were grateful people. I mean why wouldn't they be? They have all that goodness in their lives to be grateful for! However, my discoveries as a joy detective along with the informing work of Dr. Brene Brown, writer and research professor at the University of Houston, created a paradigm shift in that thinking. After countless hours collecting sociological data and stories about joy and gratitude, three powerful patterns emerged in Brene's research. First, without exception, every person she interviewed who described living a joyful life or who described themselves as joyful, actively practiced gratitude and attributed their joyfulness to their gratitude practice. Second, both joy and gratitude were described as spiritual practices that were bound to a belief in human interconnectedness and trust in a power greater than us. Third, these joyful people were quick to point out the difference between happiness and joy with happiness being an emotion connected to our circumstances and joy being a spiritual way of engaging with the world. These folks who were interviewed talked about keeping gratitude journals, practicing daily gratitude meditations or prayers, creating art and music with gratitude, and even stopping in the midst of stressful busy days to say these words out loud to themselves or a loved one: "I am grateful for..." These folks also demonstrated an understanding that joy does not deny the reality of pain and brokenness, it co-exists with tears and vulnerability. Brene's body of research and writing stresses the importance of acknowledging our grief and honouring our struggle while not over-identifying with or getting stuck in our pain.

I see this research as a call to action similar to Paul's call to action in Thessalonians. A call to practice gratitude, trust and faith, in whatever our circumstances, as they are the seedbed of joy. I think that our psalmist would agree with Dr. Brown's research too. Today's psalm speaks to a kind of joy that is so much more than a sensation of happiness or a natural disposition. It speaks of a kind of rejoicing that sees the world in all its beauty and brokenness. The kind of rejoicing that flows out of gratitude, trusts in God's goodness, and hopes towards a time when those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy.

As we cultivate joy through gratitude and trust, the culmination or fruit is a radiant rejoicing that springs only from the well of Divine Love and compels us to work towards the healing and restoration we hope for - and that God hopes for in and through us. May we become the kind of spiritual ancestors for our children,

grandchildren, nephews, nieces, friends and neighbours who testify to the Light that is holding all of us - the Christ Light that shines it's infinite love and mercy upon all - even in the shadows, even in the unlikeliest places. This is joyful news. May we become the kind of people who radiate joy!

Hymn of Response: "Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming" [HWB # 211, vv.1&2]

*Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming from tender stem has sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming as saints of old have sung.
It came, a floweret bright, amid the cold of winter,
when half-spent was the night.*

*Isaiah 'twas foretold it, the Rose I have in mind.
With Mary we behold it, the virgin mother kind.
To show God's love aright, she bore to us a savior,
when half-spent was the night.*

Benediction:

[Beth Woelk]

Blessed are you who bear the light in unbearable times, who testify to it's endurance amid the unendurable, who bear witness to its persistence when everything seems in shadow or grief. Blessed are you in whom the light lives - in whom the brightness blazes - your heart a chapel, an altar where in the deepest night can be seen the fire that shines forth in you, in unaccountable faith, in stubborn hope, in love that illumines every broken thing it finds. (by Jan Richardson in Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons)

Sending Hymn: "Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming" [HWB # 211, v.3]

Flower, whose fragrance tender with sweetness fills the air,
dispel in glorious splendor the darkness ev'rywhere.
True man, yet very God, from sin and death he saves us,
and lightens ev'ry load.